

Farm Tourism in Punjab - A Case Study on the Concept and Its Sustainability

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Abstract: The concept of farm tourism envisages private sector farmers / farm house owners providing a rural tourism experience to visitors. As farm tourism operations are small businesses with limited promotional resources the public sector assists with operational guidelines and publicity in partnership with them. Farm owner acts as both hosts and guides to the visiting tourist. The farm houses provide a clean, hygienic environment with modern facilities for the comfort of visitors, which meet the standards defined by Punjab Tourism (aka the Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board) Farm stay experience introduces travellers to real 'Punjabi' hospitality, with fine 'home cooked' meals, farm activities and the opportunity to meet families from the outback and country regions of Punjab. Visitors can introduce their children to real life farm animals and the world of farming through farm holidays.

Keywords: Farm, Tourism, Punjab, Agriculture, Culture, Tradition, Economy.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a journey into mysticism. This is one place where you can travel through 5000 years of history, culture and civilization. It is covered on one side by the mighty peaks of a mountain that towers above everything else in the world and on the other hand it merges into the vastness of the blue waters. In-between there are plains depicting a rich culture, heritage and traditions. It's a huge canvas of myriad hues covering desert, forests, backwaters, colorful costumes, festivals and delectable fare of diverse cuisines.

It's a wonder that one of the world's most scintillating destination –India—which is metaphorically speaking comparable to a living museum has failed to realize its tourism potential. However, previous one decade has seen a slow but sure progress and we are today among the fastest growing tourism economies in the world. It is manifested in the fact that in the year 2009 we received 5.11 million tourists and India's rank in world tourism arrivals and world tourism receipts now stand at 41 and 22 respectively. (source: tourism. gov. in-official website of MOT-GOI)

This certainly is an encouraging sign. India's growing clout in the world as a financial powerhouse as well as recognition of India's soft-power is sure to translate into world to sit-up and take notice. It also means substantial increase in tourist footfalls in coming one decade.

The question is whether we are prepared for it? In terms of infrastructure there is a steady growth but it still needs a great deal of improvement to be termed as truly of international standard. However, that is beyond the scope of this paper and here the point of discussion is whether this kind of tourism growth along with the manifold increase in domestic tourism going to be sustainable. The concept of niche tourism is still not explored by the tourism industry here and mass tourism is having an adverse impact on already fragile ecological balance of several destinations.

In the above background, this case study highlights a tourism model known as 'Farm Tourism' developed by Punjab state tourism department and it can be considered as a move which has lot of foresightedness in its conceptualization and planning. The tourism model discussed has its genesis in the broader concept of rural tourism but while rural tourism due to practical limitations has remained up to drawing room academic discussions only, Farm Tourism is a practical concept which can be replicated in other parts of the country as well.

Before discussing the Farm Tourism Model, I would like to give a brief overview of Punjab state and also about the broad concept of rural tourism.

2. PUNJAB STATE-AN OVERVIEW

Punjab is known as land of five rivers. The Punjab Govt. has give tourism a special status by declaring it as an industry in the year 1996. The state does not have much to offer as far as natural resources are concerned. But state has excellent infrastructure as compared to other states, which is helpful in attracting tourists. The tourism product of Punjab is varied and rich in culture and heritage, food, festivals, fairs, local arts and crafts, palaces, monuments, religious places and much more. (www.oppires.com-)

However, the most vibrant image of Punjab is its people. The robust, full of joy, full of life Punjabis and their legendary hospitality is a part of folk lore. Their dances, music, cuisine, attitude towards life, almost everything is larger than life. There is nothing ordinary about a true Punjabi. Therefore, in terms of tourism product the most sellable item here is the life-style of Punjab and an experience of this life-style. This is possible only if a tourist visits a rural site or to be more precise a village of Punjab. This although sounds highly impressive but in practical terms s more of wishful thinking as rural tourism as a concept has failed to take-off due to lack of basic infrastructure in rural India.

3. RURAL TOURISM---DEFINITION

Any form of tourism that showcased the rural life, art, culture and heritage a rural localities thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism—Rural tourism is essentially an activity which takes place in the countryside. It is multi-faceted and may entail farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism and eco-tourism. As against conventional tourism, rural tourism has certain typical characteristics like; it is experience oriented, the locations are sparsely populated, it is predominantly in natural environment, it meshes with seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and tradition.

4. FARM TOURISM

4.1 The Concept: The concept of farm tourism envisages private sector farmers / farm house owners providing a rural tourism experience to visitors. As farm tourism operations are small businesses with limited promotional resources the public sector assists with operational guidelines and publicity in partnership with them.

The farm house owners act as both hosts and guides to the visiting tourist. The farm houses provide a clean, hygienic environment with modern facilities for the comfort of visitors, which meet the standards defined by Punjab Tourism (aka the Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board). Preference is given to farms which have agricultural land attached. The farm house owner should provide home cooked food, comfortable accommodation and show the visitor the local agricultural practices such as floriculture, harvesting, bee keeping, dairying etc. and introduce the rural way of life to him through various participatory activities. The visitors must be able to enjoy the natural surroundings in fresh air.

Apart from the farm experience the visitor should get exposure to local community life, which may mean attending a panchayat meeting, exposure to local songs, food, dances, art and craft, etc.

A village tour should be included visiting the local artisans like the carpenter, blacksmith, etc. The visitors may also experience festival occasions such as marriages and local melas.

They can also participate or witness village games such as wresting, gulidanda, kite flying and have rides on bullock carts, tractors, etc. Experiences such as jumping on the hay and taking a bath in the tubewell could be unique feature for both adults and children from urban areas.

They can also see the important fairs and festivals being organised in the area along with important monuments, havelis, historical sites, etc. Each farm can aim at developing a unique selling point; some specialising in organic farming, others in floriculture, natural health management, horse breeding, etc.

4.2 Role of Punjab Tourism: In addition to each farm's own promotional activity Punjab Tourism will act as a promoter of farm tourism as a major attraction of India's main agricultural state. It will promote farm accommodation and activities in partnership with the private sector providers. The quality of services offered by farm houses is to be verified by Punjab Tourism. It then enrolls them in the scheme and provides mandatory training, as well as development and operational advice, and undertakes promotional activity for farm tourism via the Internet, publications and media relations. Punjab

Tourism selects the farms according to clear guidelines on the required facilities, and also benchmarks the farms and monitors the delivery of services rendered by them. Priority selection will be given to farms providing a wide range of activities and excursion possibilities.

4.3 Implementation: Punjab Tourism will provide a well qualified Farm Tourist Product Executive who is responsible for:

- Verification of applications for enrolment made by farm owners.
- Recommendation of suitable applications for approval.
- Inclusion of all enrolled farm houses in promotional activity.
- Advice on farm tourism operations and promotion.
- Monitoring of the development and economic impact of farm tourism.
- Coordination of training provision for farm tourism operators and staff.

4.4. BENEFITS TO FARM ACCOMMODATION OPERATORS: It is well known that tourism activity has a multiplier effect. It can be expected that tourist stays and associated spending will make a significant contribution to the rural economy and improve the quality of life of the farmers and communities involved. Farm Tourism provides farm owners with a source of additional income on their existing assets. It provides them also with an opportunity to interact socially with various kinds of visitors, elevating their social status and enriching their lives and those of their community in general.

4.5 Community Participation: Community participation is a very important part of this concept as the scheme envisages visits to the local village, interaction with panchayat members and attendance at village functions, etc. Experience has shown that tourists cannot be looked after by the farm owners alone. The farmer will be expected to solicit and engage community involvement with his guests. The spillover effect is thereby witnessed by the whole of the village community. In many instances a number of activities are undertaken such as camel cart rides, bullock rides, artisans display, mehndi, folk music and dance, village safaris, etc. This results in community participation, generation of employment and additional income for the villagers.

4.6 Stay: Concept of farm tourism includes imagining a gateway in the peace and tranquility of the farm and its surroundings. Waking up to the dawn chorus, birds chirping, spotting a squirrel foraging for nuts...Imagine enjoying traditional accommodation, local cuisine, local farming, smoke emerging from the small mud hut, involving in local handcraft and more.

A tourist can walk along the swaying mustard fields, take a ride on the tractor, take the cattle for grazing, feed the cattle or simply sit, relax and gulp down the fresh buttermilk in the green fields.

Farm owner acts as both hosts and guides to the visiting tourist. The farm houses provide a clean, hygienic environment with modern facilities for the comfort of visitors, which meet the standards defined by Punjab Tourism (aka the Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board) Farm stay experience introduces travelers to real 'Punjabi' hospitality, with fine 'home cooked' meals, farm activities and the opportunity to meet families from the outback and country regions of Punjab. Visitors can introduce their children to real life farm animals and the world of farming through farm holidays.

With farm houses spread across Punjab, it becomes a convenient spot for weekend gateways.. Apart from the farm experience visitor is exposed to local community life, which will include panchayat meeting, exposure to local songs, food, dances, art and craft, etc. He may also experience festival occasions such as marriages and local melas.

Tourist has an option of participating or witnessing village games such as wrestling, gulidanda, kite flying and have rides on bullock carts, tractors, etc. Experiences such as jumping on the hay and taking a bath in the tube well could be unique feature for both adults and children from urban areas. They can Visit important monuments, palaces, historical sites within close proximity through guided tours organised by each farm owners. Participation in farming activities helps gain knowledge on organic farming, floriculture, horticulture, natural health management, animal breeding like cattle, goats, poultry, horse breeding and much more.

4.7 Registered Farms: Given below is a list of approved farms which are currently registered with Punjab State Tourism Department.

Bhullar Farms , Captain's Farm House , Chahal Farm House , Citrus County , Gary Farm , Jagat Farms , Jyani Natural Farm ,Mand Farm House , Mann Farm House , Mann Makhhi Farm ,Mohindra Fruit Farm, Sandhu Farm, SRAN Farm House , The Retreat, The Fort, Harchand Singh Farm House ,Haveli & Habitat ,Green Valley Farm ,Micky's Fish Farm, Sidhu Farm House, Casba Farm House, Dhillon Farm and The Kothi

5. SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE FARM TOURISM CONCEPT

Strengths:

- Relatively good infrastructure in Punjab.
- Perception and image of Punjab as a hospitable place.
- Global awareness about Punjab's culture, cuisine and traditions.
- Overall prosperity of villages in Punjab and thereby availability of modern facilities.
- Colorful nature and large heartedness of locals.

Weaknesses:

- Extreme climatic conditions in the form of harsh winter and scorching summer
- Marketing of farm tourism is relatively difficult compared to popular destinations.
- Non-availability of skilled staff affects the overall quality of service
- Relatively poor medical facilities in rural India are a deterrent for tourists.

Opportunities:

- Large number of NRIs from Punjab will help the marketing of destination.
- Increasing urbanization will lead to charm for rural and farm life.
- Increasing rush at destinations of mass tourism will create market for exclusive niche tourism
- Relatively low cost of a farm holiday will attract budget travelers , as well

Threats:

- Unscrupulous activities by some elements may create a negative image for farm tourism
- Language barrier may deter foreign tourists.
- Any revival of insurgency in Punjab will badly impact the industry
- May lead to excessive commercialization of otherwise simple rural canvas.

6. CONCLUSION

Tourism product in India is hugely varied ranging from cool retreats to beaches, desert to wildlife, spirituality to heritage, wellness to adventure sports and MICE to Rural tourism. However , tourism industry in India is not able to utilize this splendid product range and instead has focused only on conventional 'beaches-hills-forts' troika. This research paper aims at bringing forward the concept of farm tourism conceptualized and promoted by Punjab government. It is observed that with good infrastructure support this can be a very sustainable tourism option and may position India as a destination with unique offerings. This will also assist the farmers to supplement their incomes which are hugely dependent on monsoon offerings. The same model may be replicated in other parts of the country with a local flavor which will work as a tool for 'counter-urbanization' and for creation of employment opportunities at underdeveloped places.

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